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ABSTRACT

Previous literature investigating community protests of school closings may be divided into four perspectives emphasizing (1) lack of comprehensive planning, (2) lack of participative decision-making, (3) loss of community maintenance (or sense of community), and (4) contextual factors, such as district size and type. The present study examines the validity of these explanations by means of a case study survey of declining enrollment in 65 school districts over a 10-year period. After data collection by means of a questionnaire/checklist, community opposition tactics were analyzed according to severity, from writing letters to board members to voting down referenda or budgets. Ordinary least squares regressions of the four types of variables--planning, participation, community maintenance, and context--reveal that (1) comprehensive planning tends to exacerbate rather than reduce community opposition; (2) of the various participation variables, only teacher involvement reduces opposition; (3) the only community maintenance factor increasing opposition is the lack of superintendent-board compatibility; and (4) urban districts experience greater opposition than do suburban or rural districts. Taken together, the findings suggest that orthodox principles in times of growth, such as comprehensive planning and participative decision-making, may be ineffectual or counterproductive during decline. (JBM)

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WHY COMMUNITIES PROTEST SCHOOL CLOSINGS*

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Major Products Emanating from
Organizational Responses to Decline
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This paper is one of several products emanating from the research titled Organizational Responses to Decline. The complete list (to date) is as follows:

1. Berger, M. Two paradoxes in managing decline: Comprehensive planning and participation. In Kae H. Chung (ed.). The 1982 Academy of Management Proceedings. Loveland, Colorado: Lithographic Press, 1982, 334-338.

   This paper was also awarded the "1982 Best Paper in the Public Sector Division" of the Academy of Management at its 1982 Annual Meeting in New York, August, 1982.

2. Berger, M. Class size is not the issue. Paper presented at the National School Board Association Annual Meeting, Atlanta, April, 1982.

3. Berger, M. Organizational Responses to Decline: Summary Report. Submitted to the National Institute of Education, December, 1982.

4. Berger, M. Managing enrollment decline: Current knowledge and future applications. Peabody Journal of Education, 1983, (Forthcoming).*

5. Berger, M. Neighborhood schools: The new (?) legal response to enrollment decline and desegregation. Urban Education, 1983, (Forthcoming).**

6. Berger, M. Retrenchment policies and their organizational consequences. Peabody Journal of Education, 1983, (Forthcoming).*

7. Berger, M. Stages in decline: How educational organization scales down. Educational Administration Quarterly, 1983, (Under review).**

8. Berger, M. Studying enrollment decline (and other timely issues) via the case survey. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 1983, (Forthcoming).**

9. Berger, M. Why communities protest school closings. Education and Urban Society, 1983, (Forthcoming).**

10. Boone, C. The effects of succession on organizations in decline. Doctoral Dissertation, Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, April, 1982.

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WHY COMMUNITIES PROTEST SCHOOL CLOSINGS

Quite predictably, members of the community who are directly affected by school closings protest despite the good intentions, rational planning, and "farsighted" leadership of the board. At issue is whether or not to close a certain school and what criteria should be used to make that decision. As the conflict heats up, coalitions form ("Save Our Schools!"), positions harden, and board meetings are disrupted. Various groups assert not only the right to present their particular views, but also the right to be the decisive factor. Caught between the forces of resource scarcity on the one hand, and rancorous conflict on the other, school boards inevitably "bite the bullet" and close some underutilized schools.

What is interesting in all of this is that while school closings create the greatest threat to school board legitimacy since desegregation (Cuban, 1979), community opposition to such decisions varies. Some communities react violently by voting down referenda (or budgets), intitiating law suits, and/or voting to replace board members at the next election, while other communities react much less vehemently. The question is why does opposition vary?

The purpose of this paper is to attempt to shed some light on this question. After identifying the theoretical explanations, the discussion will turn to the methods used to test these theories. The third section will give the results of the analysis, and finally, the discussion will conclude with the implications of the study.

THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS OF PROTEST

The theories which attempt to explain variations in community opposition to closure decisions are derived primarily from two sources. On the one hand, they come from the "advice" literature that represents the accumulated experience of school superintendents, educational consultants, and various school board

members who have coped--first hand--with the vagaries of the school closure process. On the other hand, they are found in the "empirical" literature, consisting largely of enrollment decline case material, written by academics, which describe the events in a particular district. The authors of such case studies attempt to infer a theory from these data (see Zerchykov, 1981, for a comprehensive review of these literatures).

LACK OF COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

The first perspective states that comprehensive, deliberate planning techniques are preferred to less systematic, short term planning processes. Essentially, this means that districts experiencing enrollment decline should collect and analyze data and this effort, in turn, will produce organizational responses which will be acceptable to all parties.

Support for this theory comes not only from the scientific management principle to "plan ahead" but also from the enrollment decline literature. For example, it has been argued that retrenchment planning needs to be based on reliable local data -- not only on enrollments but also on community needs and opinions, staff skills, facilities, programs, and grade organization (Bellon, 1977; Brown & Serville, 1979; Keough, 1978). Along the same lines, Bishop (1979) argues for a comprehensive facilities inventory using systematic standards and procedures, and cohort-survival methodologies for projection and non-demographic indicators, such as real estate information. Finally, Sargent and Handy (1974), Estes (1977), and Divoky (1979) contend that planning for retrenchment should be a year-round activity where all districts, no matter what their unique issues, require a comprehensive plan for shrinkage.

However, rational planning generates criteria, percentages, and ratios which tend to overwhelm and frustrate the less-technically inclined. Furthermore, many people believe statistics can be manipulated to show what one wants them to show. If this is true, the collection and presentation of elaborate information will increase rather than decrease opposition because parents will believe the policy makers know what schools they want to close in the first place and are simply constructing the numbers to justify their predetermined positions.

LACK OF PARTICIPATION

The second perspective argues that greater credibility and commitment are generated, and less resistance to change occurs when people are involved in decisions that affect them. This theory suggests that board members and administrators should broaden participation in the school closing process. The appeal of this argument is that it promises to reduce the inevitable tension between policy-makers and those who will be affected by policy decisions.

Numerous enrollment decline experts state the importance of participation in closure decisions (Eisenberger, 1974; Keough, 1978; Sargent & Handy, 1974). Eisenberger, for example, is emphatic on the issue:

> Technical planning and accurate data gathering are not enough. School officials need to let the community know they value their involvement, enlist the support of community opinion leaders, and establish district-wide, broadly-representative task forces to engage community leaders in helping to plan for decline. (1974, pp. 34-37).

Involvement should not be limited to the community. Consultants, as well as teachers, should aid with the technical and political aspects of the situation (Behn, 1980; Divoky, 1979).

On the other hand, participation may not be a panacea. Levine (1979), for example, argues that participation may crystallize special interests so

that rather than facilitating interest agregation, participative mechanisms serve to articulate and polarize interests. Eisenberger (1974) warns that teachers are often more loyal to their school than to the district as a whole. Finally, consultant involvement may exacerbate tensions rather than relieve them, especially if the high-priced outsider is perceived as a pawn of the board.

LOSS OF COMMUNITY MAINTENANCE

The third view on community opposition contends that when resistance occurs, it stems not from a loss of the educational aspects of particular facilities, but rather it comes from the sense of loss of the functions and relations which bind the community together and maintain its identity.

Several education scholars have observed the non-educative functions of schools. Alford (1960), for example, asserts that schools guarantee sustained personal interaction and the achievement of personal goals of their participants. Brown et al. (1975) identify interests of various school groups in closure decisions. Finally, Peshkin (1980) argues that school events attach local residents to the school and each other.

In contrast, the focus on the community maintenance may play little or no part in opposition to closure decisions. First, communities may not be as dependent on their schools as they once were. Other institutions, such as the church, may be ascending in the provision of the "ties that bind." Second, communities are more heterogeneous now. As a consequence, there may be more of a temporary, limited liability type of investment in schools than there was ten or twenty years ago. Finally, the growing disenchantment with schools and school professionals in recent years may lead community members to downplay the importance of the school's non-education functions.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

For over three decades, the dominant thinking in the management literature has been that the environment poses significant contingencies and constraints for organization behavior. Support for this proposition comes from Rodekhor (1976) and Dembowski et al. (1979) who evaluated the effects of district size. Colton and Frelich (1979), Boyd (1979), and Burlingame (1979) implicitly focused on district type (urban, suburban, rural), and finally, Hickrod (1976) used community SES as a major variable in his study.

It is difficult to speculate on the effects of these variables on opposition. One direction is to extend Boyd's (1979, p. 362) working hypothesis that conflict levels associated with decline, and especially with school closings, will be higher in higher status districts than in lower status districts. Drawing upon his seminal work in the area, we will assume the very same hypothesis and subject it to verification.

METHOD

SAMPLE

A nonrandom sample of 65 school districts whose enrollment decline experiences were reported in case studies was used to test these four perspectives. The cases came from professional journals, fugitive (nonpublished) documents, ERIC bibliographies, professional meetings, and government publications.

DATA COLLECTION

Data covering a 10-year period were collected via the case survey method (see Berger, 1982). The procedure involves the analysis of cases with a closed-ended questionnaire called a checklist. The checklist contains variables of interest to the researcher and can be aggregated to produce generalizations based on conventional statistical techniques. The case

survey method is particularly appropriate when a body of empirical evidence, such as the enrollment decline literature, has a large proportion of isolated, one-shot case studies.

After elaborate case search and checklist development, trained case analysts read the cases and filled out the checklists. A follow-up interview procedure supplied data missing from the original case study. To control for unreliable checklist application (when different case analysts fail to see or judge case events in the same way), 36 cases (51%) were reassigned to a second analyst to determine the degree of consistency between two independent raters on the same district. On a random sample of 50 items for the 36 cases, the average Pearson's correlation coefficient corrected by the Spearman Brown Prophecy Formula for the two raters was .78 (see Berger, 1982 for a full discussion of establishing reliability).

MEASURES

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable was measured by a weighted index of opposition tactics used by a community to protest closure decisions. It was hypothesized that certain tactics form an underlying dimension of increasing opposition to school board decisions. For example, letters to board members and petitions indicate some opposition but do not disrupt the district very much. Law suits and/or referenda defeats, on the other hand, indicate violent opposition and are a significant disruption. To test the assumption of an underlying opposition dimension, a factor analysis of the various opposition tactics was applied (principal factor w/iterations). It specified the number of factors at one, with an eigenvalue of 3.51 (see Table 1). This confirmed the hypothesis and, in turn, permitted the con-

struction of a weighted opposition index of tactics used in a district to protest board decisions. The higher the index score, the more violent the opposition in that community.

TABLE 1

FACTOR ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY OPPOSITION TACTICS

(n= 65)

ITEMS*	LOADING
1. Letters to board members	.81
2. Petitions to the board	.76
3. Heated exchanged with board	.71
4. Personal attacks on board in the media	.67
5. Demonstrations	.63
6. Board member replacement at next election (involuntary)	.60
7. Law suits	.55
8. Voting down referenda or budgets	.49
Eigenvalue	3.51
Variance Explained	100%

*Items appear as they did on the checklist. The case survey question was worded as follows: The case mentions the community used the following opposition tactics (answer beside each tactic: 1 = yes, was used; 2 = no, never happened; 9 = impossible to say).

Planning Variables

There were three planning variables: (1) notification time frame--whether the community was notified of the decline problem less than two years before the first school closing or more than two years before such a closing; (2) taskforce speed--the number of months from taskforce formation to final recommendations; and (3) planning comprehensiveness--an index of planning strategies used by the board to plan for retrenchment.

Participation Variables

There were four participation variables: (1) taskforce representativeness -- whether or not the taskforce was made up of representatives throughout the district; (2) consultant involvement -- whether or not an outside consultant was involved in the retrenchment process; (3) teacher involvement --

the extent to which teachers were involved in helping the board make retrenchment decisions; and (4) community involvement -- the extent to which the community was involved in helping the board to make retrenchment decisions.

Community Maintenance Variables

There were four community maintenance variables: (1) school disposal -- whether the closed buildings were used in a new way by the community vs. lost (sold or mothballed); (2) timing -- whether the first closure occurred in PE + 2, PE + 4, PE + 6, PE + 8, or PE + 10, where PE = peak enrollment year; (3) superintendent-community relations -- the degree to which the relations between the superintendent and community were collegial or hostile; and (4) superintendent-board compatibility -- the extent to which the superintendent was compatible (or deviant) from the board.

Contextual Variables

There were four contextual variables: (1) community type -- whether the district was urban, suburban, or rural; (2) income -- whether the average income in the district was above or below $15,000; (3) decline rate -- the percent of student decline over a ten year period from peak enrollment year (PE); and (4) percent minority -- the percent of minority students in PE + 4.

Data Analysis

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions was used to test the four general hypotheses. Table 2 gives the means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlation coefficients. Tables 3A-3D present the regression results.

Insert Table 2 here

TABLE 2

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS

2A. Planning Variables	Mean	S.D.	1.	2.	3.
1. Notification timeframe (1 = < 2 years; 2 = > 2 years)	1.43	.50			
2. Taskforce speed (months)	9.02	4.20	-.06		
3. Planning comprehensiveness (range 3 [low] to 10 [high])	6.98	2.12	.10	..06	
4. Community opposition	14.63	11.98	.19	.06	.39**

2B. Participation Variables	Mean	S.D.	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Taskforce representativesness (1 = yes; 2 = no)	1.28	.45				
2. Consultant involvement (1 = yes; 2 = no)	1.53	.50	.32*			
3. Teacher involvement (1 = not at all; 5 = extensive)	2.62	1.13	-.32*	-.18		
4. Community involvement (1 = not at all; 5 = extensive)	2.96	1.00	-.43**	-.20	.57***	
5. Community opposition (range 3-36)	14.60	11.90	-.08	-.02	.36**	.07

2C. Maintenance Variables	Mean	S.D.	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Disposal (1 = retained, 0 = lost)	.70	.46				
2. Timing of first closure (1 = PE + 2 to 5 = PE + 10)	2.40	1.69	.23*			
3. Super/Community Relations (1 = collegial to 5 = hostile)	3.56	2.91	-.37**	-.07		
4. Super/Board Compatibility (1 = compatible, 0 = incompatible)	.62	.49	.27	.09	-.48**	
5. Community opposition (range 3-36)	14.01	11.86	.19	.21	-.12	-.30

2D. Contextual Variables	Mean	S.D.	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Urban (1 = yes; 0 = no)	.34	.48				
2. Income (1 = < 14,999; 2 = > 15,000)	.51	.50	-.20			
3. Decline rate	.14	.22	.07	.06		
4. Percent Minority	.12	.05	.09	-.12	.08	
5. Community opposition (range 3-36)	14.03	11.91	.27*	.07	.04	.09

NOTE: n's for correlation range between 62 and 70.
*significant at .05 level (two-tailed test)
**significant at .01 level (two-tailed test)
***significant at .001 level (two-tailed test)

RESULTS

Prior to regression analysis, the zero-order correlation coefficients (Table 2) were examined to determine whether any redundant predictors were included. Correlation coefficients greater than .80 usually suggest that multicollinearity is present in the independent variables (Farrar & Glauber, 1967). The various correlations show no coefficient equal to or above .80. This low level of predictor correlation, therefore, should eliminate any concern for multicollinearity.

Results are presented for each of the four predictor groups. In each case, the standardized partial regression coefficients are given. Shown also are the zero-order correlation coefficients between each predictor variable and the criterion variable. In addition, the multiple $\underline{R}$ and $\underline{R}^2$ are provided (see Tables 3A to 3D).

Insert Tables 3A to 3D here

TABLE 3A

MULTIPLE REGRESSION OF COMMUNITY OPPOSITION ON PLANNING INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Independent Variables	Standardized Regression Coefficient	Zero-Order Correlation
Planning comprehensiveness	.38**	.39
Notification timeframe	.34**	.19
Taskforce speed	.08	.06
$\underline{n}$ = 62	Multiple $\underline{R}$ = .549	$\underline{R}^2$ = .302

TABLE 3B

MULTIPLE REGRESSION OF COMMUNITY OPPOSITION ON PARTICIPATION INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Independent Variables	Standardized Regression Coefficient	Zero-Order Correlation
Teacher involvement	-.40**	-.36
Consultant involvement	-.16	-.02
Taskforce representatives	.09	.08
Community involvement	.03	.07
n = 62	Multiple R = .552	R^2 = .305

TABLE 3C

MULTIPLE REGRESSION OF COMMUNITY OPPOSITION ON COMMUNITY MAINTENANCE INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Independent Variables	Standardized Regression Coefficient	Zero-Order Correlation
Superintendent/Community Compatibility	-.32**	-.30
Disposal	.16	.19
Superintendent/Community Relations	-.14	-.12
Timing	.10	.21
n = 62	Multiple R = .593	R^2 = .352

TABLE 3D

MULTIPLE REGRESSION OF COMMUNITY OPPOSITION ON CONTEXTUAL INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Independent Variables	Standardized Regression Coefficient	Zero-Order Correlation
Urban	.47**	.27
Percent minority	.12	.09
Decline rate	.11	.04
Income	.03	.07

$n = 62$ Multiple $R = .383$ $R^2 = .147$

NOTE: In all tables: ** = $p < .01$.

PLANNING

The results in Table 3A tend to refute the planning contention. First, the data show that planning comprehensiveness has a strong, positive effect ($p < .01$) on opposition; that is, the more comprehensive the planning, the greater the opposition. Next, the data reveal that districts which spend more than two years between notification of a decline problem and school closings are more likely to experience greater opposition than districts which move more quickly ($p < .01$). Finally, it appears that taskforce speed from formation to recommendation has no effect on opposition. The coefficient of determination (R^2) for all these variables reflects 35% of the variation in the opposition variable.

PARTICIPATION

The most serious damage to this hypothesis (Table 3B) is that community involvement, taskforce representativeness, and consultant involvement have

no significant impact on community opposition. That is, they make no difference in reducing opposition. Moreover, the sign on the consultant involvement variable is negative, suggesting that the presence of consultants is associated with greater opposition, although the effect fails to reach significance at the .05 level. Support for the hypothesis, on the other hand, comes from the teacher involvement variable ($p < .01$). The data show that the more teachers are involved in retrenchment decisions, the less the community opposition. The total amount of variance explained by the four variables in 30.5%.

COMMUNITY MAINTENANCE

Table 3C indicates that the timing of the first closing, the relationship between the superintendent and the community, and whether the closed school will be recycled for some use or not have no significant effect on opposition. The significant finding ($p < .01$) is that communities in which the superintendent is perceived to be incompatible with the board experience greater opposition than communities where the superintendent and board are more compatible. The total variance explained in the dependent variable is 35.2%.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Of the four contextual factors listed in Table 3D, only the urban variable attained significance ($p < .01$). The other demographic variables, namely, percent minority, decline rate, and district income, had no impact on community opposition. The finding is that urban districts experience greater community opposition than suburban or rural districts.

DISCUSSION

The interpretation of these results must be tempered by the possibility of a biased sample. The case survey method takes as its unit of analysis cases written about a district's particular enrollment decline experience.

If the various cases are biased from the standpoint of either author distortion, fact misrepresentation, or low external validity to other school districts, the biases from the original cases are transmitted to the present study.

This qualification notwithstanding, the analyses above suggest a revision of the various perspectives on community protest. First, the data show that comprehensive deliberate planning will not reduce community opposition as expected, but rather, will tend to exacerbate it. Although comprehensive planning may be functional for other purposes, the widely-held belief that such planning processes will reduce opposition to retrenchment decisions is not supported in this study.

Second, the data show that only teacher involvement has a mitigating effect on opposition. Other participation variables, contrary to expectations, have no impact on community opposition. In addition, although the consultant variable failed to reach statistical significance at the .05 level, its sign was negative (meaning the presence of a consultant was associated with greater community opposition) and its beta weight in the combined equation was significant at the .10 level.

Third, the results reveal a general lack of support for the community maintenance effect. Opposition does not vary as a function of retention of the closed school, the timing of the first closure, or the relations between the superintendent and the community. What does seem critical, on the other hand, is the lack of superintendent-board compatibility. Where a rupture in this relationship exists, it is associated with greater community opposition than if the superintendent and the board were compatible in their school closing outlook. This finding definitely supports the community maintenance hypothesis.

Finally, the data show that urban districts experience greater community opposition than do suburban or rural districts. This finding is relatively easy to interpret. Urban areas are more heterogeneous and larger in size than other types of communities. According to Minar (1966), they are least able to manage conflict effectively because of a lack of conflict management resources. Urban districts are also composed of residential enclaves which rarely are "public regarding" political cultures (Boyd, 1979). In small, more homogeneous districts, on the other hand, the likelihood of "public regarding" cultures is greater and hence, so is the probability of less opposition to closure decisions.

In conclusion, this study indicates that community protest to school closings is a highly complex phenomenon. While it is affected by planning, participation, maintenance, and contextual variables, the results are often counter-intuitive. Specifically, the data show a revision in the conventional wisdom concerning planning and participation may be necessary. The principles which served us so well during periods of growth may be, at best, ineffectual during decline and, at worst, counter-productive.

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